

facilities were constructed to store commodities such as ammunition, clothing, subsistence, forage, medical supplies and camp equipment. On a daily basis, approximately 40 steamboats, 75 sailing ships and 100 barges operated from its wharves. By the fall of 1864, 20 miles of railroad constructed by the Railroad Construction Corps stretched from City Point to the rear of the Union siege lines, and about 18 trains daily made the trip to the front delivering supplies and evacuating casualties to the hospital complex at City Point.

### **BREAKTHROUGH ON THE DIMMOCK LINE, JUNE 15-18, 1864**

Lee was completely fooled by Grant's move across the James River. For several days, the Confederate commander held the bulk of his army in their lines in front of Richmond. He did not move south across the James until June 18, and even then was not entirely convinced that Grant's entire army was across the river. Thus, when the Union XVIII Corps, under General W.F. "Baldy" Smith, arrived at the eastern approaches to Petersburg on June 15, Beauregard had only half of Dearing's cavalry brigade and a single infantry brigade under the former Virginia governor (now Brigadier General) Henry A. Wise. Confederate reinforcements from the Bermuda Hundred lines had been ordered to march rapidly for Petersburg, but could not reach the city before late evening. Until then, the 2,200 men under Wise, plus Dearing's cavalry, were all that Beauregard had at his disposal.

After being delayed by a skirmish at Baylor's Farm, Smith's Corps marched in sight of the Dimmock Line at approximately 11 a.m. on June 15. Remembering the debacle at Cold Harbor, the veteran Union general performed exhaustive reconnaissance. Determining that the eastern expanse of Confederate defenses was manned primarily by artillery, he finally ordered an attack which began about 6 p.m.

Because the Confederate works were actually held only by elements of Ferree's dismounted 4th North Carolina Cavalry, supported by Graham's Battery, the Union troops advanced entirely as a skirmish line with intervals of two paces between each man. Entering a ravine between what the Confederates had designated Batteries 7 and 8 on the Dimmock Line, which was a weak point in the otherwise formidable Rebel breastworks, Smith's men were able to capture from the rear Battery 5, one of the strongest of the Confederate positions, which was a V-shaped salient containing 16 guns. Commanding the 13th New Hampshire, Colonel Aaron F. Stevens reported, "Advanced our line at about 6.15 p.m., when my skirmish line, consisting of about 400, the center being held by my regiment, assaulted the enemy's advance rifle pits ... Being the first to break the line of enemy's works around Petersburg, [we] captured four 12-pounder Howitzer iron guns, a large quantity of ammunition and about 150 prisoners. Lost about forty men and officers."

Meanwhile, the rest of that sector of the Confederate line, manned by the 26th and 46th Virginia Infantry, of Wise's brigade, was rapidly disintegrating. Men from the 1st, 4th, 6th and 22nd US Colored Troops (USCT) moved south along the enemy works. Among the other positions captured was Battery 9, which contained a three-gun section of Sturdivant's artillery, on a slight hill at the junction of the Jordan's Point and George Court House roads, two important routes into Petersburg. Two companies of the 1st USCT cleared obstacles around this work, and turned the captured guns on the

Confederates, allowing their regiment to charge. After his regiment overran another battery, Major John McMurray, 6th USCT, recalled, "The ditch was now full of men, and we began to climb up the face of the parapet. A man would run his bayonet into the side of the parapet, and another would use it as a step-ladder to climb up. As we were thus ascending I was wondering why the Johnnies behind the parapet were so quiet. It was now getting quite dark, and I felt sure that as fast as a 'colored troop' would put his head above the level of the parapet it would be shot off, or he would be knocked back into the ditch; and I fully expected the Sixth U.S. Colored Troops, officers and all, to find their death in that ditch. But they didn't. Not a bit of it. We climbed into the fort or battery only to find it empty. The last Confederate was gone, save one, a fair haired boy of 17 or 18 years, dead."

During this assault, Lieutenant William H. Appleton, Company H, 4th USCT, won the Medal of Honor for being the "first man of the Eighteenth Corps to enter the enemy's works." In his congratulatory order to his troops following this action, General Smith stated, "To the colored troops comprising the division of Gen. Hinks, the General commanding would call attention of his command. With the veterans of the 18th Corps they have stormed the works of the enemy and carried them, taking guns and prisoners, and in the whole affair they have displayed all the qualities of good soldiers."

By 9 p.m. the Federals had taken Batteries 3 through 13 – in all, nearly two miles of the Confederate line. Despite the possibility of having a clear path into Petersburg, Smith declined a night advance. Perturbed by a rumor circulating that Rebel reinforcements were on the way, he was also incapacitated by recurring bouts of malaria contracted during antebellum service in Florida. At midnight on June 15 he telegraphed Butler stating, "It is impossible for me to go further to-night, but unless I misapprehend the topography, I hold the key to Petersburg." Despite his optimism, the ailing Union general permitted the Confederates to withdraw about a mile to the rear of the captured section of the Dimmock Line, where they threw up hasty entrenchments along Harrison's Creek. Having squandered another opportunity to capture a weakly defended Petersburg, the Union army would soon be involved in a protracted siege operation. On July 19, 1864 Smith was relieved from command of the XVIII Corps and he spent the remainder of the war on "special duty."

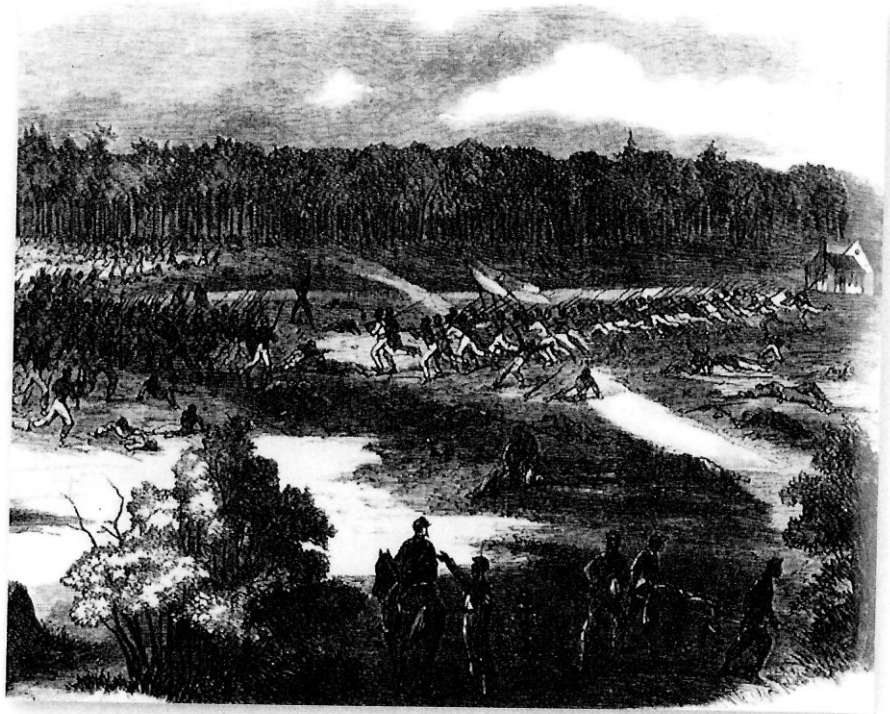
Meanwhile, the Union II Corps, temporarily commanded by David B. Birney as General Winfield Scott Hancock was suffering from wounds incurred at Gettysburg, arrived to reinforce the attacking Federal columns. Darkness ended the fighting on June 15, but the attacks were renewed the next day. As a result, the line southeast of Petersburg also gave way. In response, Beauregard stripped forces under General Robert Hoke from the Howlett Line at Bermuda Hundred to defend the city, and urgently requested that Lee send more divisions, which drained the precious reserves from the Richmond lines. Reinforcements arriving in the Petersburg trenches consisted of Bushrod Johnson's Division, Anderson's Corps, and by dusk of that second day Beauregard could muster about 14,000 to face the Federals.

The third day of battle was practically a repetition of the preceding day, with more of the southern section of the Dimmock Line collapsing under continued Federal pressure. However, at about 12.30 a.m., June 18, Beauregard ordered his forces to begin a withdrawal from the line along Harrison's Creek to new positions, under the supervision of Colonel D.B. Harris, of the Engineer Department. Throughout the hours before dawn, the Confederates engaged in



Nicknamed "Baldy" at West Point because his hair was thinner than normal for his age, William Farrar Smith was shocked by the bloodshed he witnessed at Cold Harbor, after his XVIII Corps had been detached from Butler's Army of the James to reinforce Meade. As a result, he was reluctant to press home his breakthrough on the Dimmock Line outside Petersburg on June 15, 1864. He was relieved from field command four days later and placed on "special service" for the remainder of the war. (Library of Congress LC-B813-2160)

The black troops of the 22nd Colored Regiment, Duncan's Brigade, charge the Dimmock Line on June 15, 1864. Based on a sketch by Edwin Forbes, this engraving was published in *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper* on July 9, 1864. (Author's collection)



the construction of a new defense line with good fields of fire about a mile closer to Petersburg. Unavoidably, these new works were so close to Petersburg that the enemy would be able to bombard the city. Colonel Alfred Roman, aide to Beauregard, later recalled that "without a moment's rest the digging of the trenches was begun, with such utensils as had been hastily collected at Petersburg, many of the men using their bayonets, their knives, and even their tin cans, to assist in the rapid execution of the work."

A general assault of Union forces was ordered at 4 a.m. that day, but it was quickly established that the eastern section of the Dimmock Line had been abandoned, except for some skirmishers who were gradually forced back. Advancing across the Norfolk & Petersburg Railroad, the Northern troops continued until they were brought face to face with the muzzles of the defenders' guns. Meanwhile, Confederate reinforcements continued to pour in to fill the new lines of defense, and Lee arrived at Petersburg to direct operations in person.

A major Union attack involving elements of four corps was launched on the new Confederate line at about 3 p.m. on June 18. During the course of several futile assaults, the 1st Maine Heavy Artillery, commanded by Colonel Daniel Chaplin and serving as infantry, suffered the most severe losses of any regiment in a single engagement of the entire war. About 4 p.m. this 900-strong unit emerged from the concealment of the Prince George Court House Road, only to be met by a heavy crossfire. Commanding the 3rd Division, II Corps, General Gershom Mott recalled that the 1st Maine advanced from a fringe of pines, their well-dressed ranks surging on like "a blue wave crested with a glistening foam of steel." Lieutenant Horace H. Shaw, Company F, remembered, "The field became a burning, seething, crashing, hissing hell." In less than half an hour, the 1st Maine withdrew having sustained 241 dead and dying and 371 wounded.



Once again, fighting ended with the coming of darkness. The Federal attempt to capture Petersburg had failed, with a loss of about 10,000 men, compared with an estimated 4,000 Confederate casualties. The lines of battle before Petersburg were clearly drawn, and both armies now settled down for a long siege. On July 19, 1864, Grant telegraphed General Henry Halleck to "Please order Colonel Abbot's siege train forward." That simple command began nine months of the most sustained fighting and extensive building of fortifications seen thus far in the Civil War.

### JERUSALEM PLANK ROAD (FIRST WELDON RAILROAD), JUNE 21-24, 1864

While the Union siege operations around Petersburg were being consolidated, Grant began a series of battles aimed at extending his siege lines to the west and cutting the rail link supplying Petersburg. On June 21 the II Corps, temporarily commanded by David B. Birney as Hancock was incapacitated by wounds incurred at Gettysburg, supported by the VI Corps, attempted to cut the Weldon Railroad south of Petersburg. This movement was preceded by the cavalry divisions of generals James H. Wilson and Augustus Kautz, consisting of 5,500 cavalry and 12 guns, which began tearing up the track on the railroad as the II Corps moved across the Jerusalem Plank Road. According to a report in the Petersburg *Express*, the troopers "cut the telegraph wires, burnt the water tanks, wood sheds, and office, and tore up



Based on a sketch by E.F. Mullen and published in *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper* on July 9, 1864, this engraving depicts African-American troops of Hink's division bringing in the guns of Sturdivant's battery, captured on June 15, 1864. White soldiers cheer them on in the background. (Author's collection)